

ELSE PAULY

## THE LEGEND OF R̥SYAŚR̥ṄGA AS A DANISH OPERA

Among the many tales that have found their way from ancient India to the rest of the world (often in disguise), one of the most pleasant is the legend of R̥śyaśr̥ṅga. In his two articles *Die Sage von R̥śyaśr̥ṅga* (1897) and *Zur Sage von R̥śyaśr̥ṅga* (1901), both reprinted in *Philologica Indica* (1940)<sup>1</sup>, Heinrich Lüders compared the different versions of the tale in brahmanical and Buddhist texts and reconstructed what he regarded as the original story, from which the existing texts deviate in one way or the other. An account of the legend is found in Winternitz's *History of Indian Literature*<sup>2</sup>, and it may here suffice to give a brief outline as a background to the Danish work that is the subject of this paper. The hermit Vibhāṇḍaka, though advanced in ascetic practices, becomes the father of a son, borne by an antelope doe that has drunk water containing his seed. R̥śyaśr̥ṅga, as the boy is called from the small antelope horn that appears on his head, is brought up in the hermitage and instructed in the ascetic discipline by Vibhāṇḍaka, who keeps away from him any knowledge of the outside world and, especially, any notion of woman. Now, the kingdom of Aṅga is smitten with drought, and the king is informed by the sages that the only means to get rain again is

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1. Lüders spelt the name with ś, because that was the form generally accepted in classical literature. I have here used the older spelling with ṣ, adopted both in the Mahābhārata text and in J. A. B. van Buitenen's translation.

2. English edition, Vol. I (1927), pp. 399-401.

to have R̥śyaśṛṅga brought to the country, not by force, but enticed by a woman. The king's daughter undertakes the task, and one day when the youth is alone she appears to him in her maidenly beauty, while pretending to be a lad from another hermitage; the innocent boy is an easy prey to the arts of the well-instructed princess, and desolate when she leaves. On his return, Vibhāṇḍaka is alarmed by the excitement of his son, who willingly tells him about his adventure with the young hermit. Vibhāṇḍaka warns him that such visitors are evil demons — which does not prevent R̥śyaśṛṅga from following the seductress, when she appears again. On their arrival in the drought-smitten country the rain pours down — R̥śyaśṛṅga and the princess become husband and wife, and Vibhāṇḍaka desists from his intended curse. One important difference between the story as told here and what may be called the classical version, the legend told in the Mahābhārata, 3rd book 110-113, is that the latter lets R̥śyaśṛṅga be seduced, not by the king's daughter, but by a courtesan. Lüders could, however, demonstrate that the tale in our present Mahābhārata, on this and on other points, deviates from the original version in the Mahābhārata itself, which — in agreement with old Buddhist versions — tells of a princess as the seductress of the guileless youth.

It is assumed that it is from texts belonging to Northern Buddhism that the legend reached Europe and, in an allegorical shape, added the important component to the unicorn-legend that the animal can only be caught if it is enticed by a virgin. Since the development of the European unicorn-legend<sup>3</sup> has nothing to do with my present purpose, I must refrain from occupying myself with it, but I should like to call attention to the article *Die Einhorn-Legende* by Dieter Schlingloff<sup>4</sup>, from the rich contents of which I have here only reason to mention the observation that though Lüders has shown that two of the brahmanical versions of the legend (in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa)

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3. See the article by J.W. EINHORN in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, Band 3, Lief. 4/5, Berlin, New York, 1981, pp. 1246-1255.

4. In « Christiana Albertina, Kieler Universitäts-Zeitschrift », H. 11 (1971), pp. 51-64.

have substituted a courtesan for the princess of their own earlier versions, it cannot be taken for granted that a courtesan was not originally the seductress in the story. The two versions existed along with each other for a long time, and our texts do not permit us to decide which of the two versions is original in this respect<sup>5</sup>.

The proposal made by J. Hertel<sup>6</sup> and L. v. Schroeder<sup>7</sup> to explain the poem of R̥śyaśṛṅga as an ancient drama has not found general acceptance. However that may be, the story has later been the object of dramatic treatment. As mentioned by Lüders<sup>8</sup>, it was done in the mediaeval Japanese opera *Ikkaku sennin* and a drama called *Narukami*; and in this century it was freely dramatized by A. Christina Albers as *The Great Drought*<sup>9</sup>. It seems, however, to have escaped notice that the legend also became the theme of a Danish opera composed towards the end of the 19th century.

On New Year's day 1898 the opera *Vifandaka* by the young Danish composer Alfred Tofft (1865-1931) was performed for the first time. It was known to have been in preparation for several

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5. The oldest of our texts, the gāthās of the Naḷinikā (or Naḷinī) Jātaka (preserving, according to Lüders, the oldest remains of a literary version of the legend), contains nothing to show the position of Naḷinikā, the lady addressed by the king and sent to abduct the young hermit [in Pāli: Isisiṅga, about which see the article *Isipātana migadāya* by Colette Caillat, JA, 1968 (published 1969), pp. 177-183]; it is the prose story of a much later time that speaks of her as the daughter of the king. - Schlingloff is inclined to regard it as less probable that the place of the princess should have been taken by a courtesan than the opposite, and he thinks that the substitution of the princess for the courtesan may have been made by the Buddhists, when the legend was turned into a jātaka, in which the Buddha identifies himself with the young hermit (in Sanskrit *Ekaśṛṅga* or -in), and his wife (Yaśodhara) with the lady. This identification (which is made in the Mahāvastu, in the Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā and in the Bhadrakalpāvadāna) is, however, not made in the *samodhāna*, the summing-up, of the Pāli jātaka; here, a matter to which Schlingloff does not call attention, a discontented monk is identified with Isisiṅga, his earlier wife with Naḷinikā, while Isisiṅga's father is identified with the Buddha.

6. WZKM, 18 (1904), pp. 158 f.

7. *Mysterium und Mimus im Rigveda*, pp. 292 ff.

8. *Philologica Indica*, p. 70 with note 2, referring to works by F. W. K. Müller and Takakusu.

9. In «Calcutta Review», Nov. 1923, pp. 231 ff., according to *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I (1927), p. 399, note 3.

years — as early as 1890 the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen had accepted the composer's draft for an opera the scene of which was laid in the legendary world of ancient India, and in the intervening years the composer had been on a study tour to Germany. Tofft had drawn on Adolf Holtzmann's *Indische Sagen* for his text, basing the action on the R̥śyaśṛṅga legend, which he combined with other matter, mainly from the Sāvitrī episode<sup>10</sup>. His draft of the text was handed over to an experienced author, Einar Christiansen (1861 - 1939), who made a poetic libretto of it (as he did for other Danish operas); this libretto was published in 1897 (reprints in the following years) with the information that the text of the opera had been written by Einar Christiansen (in 1893) on a theme indicated by the composer and taken from Indian legends.

That Tofft read the Mahābhārata story in Holtzmann's version saved him and Christiansen any doubt about the position and the character of the heroine. Adolf Holtzmann was convinced that the remains of the ancient Indian heroic songs were contained in the Mahābhārata in a disfigured state, from which he endeavoured to reconstruct them in his *Indische Sagen* (1845-47, revised edition 1854; re-issued by Winternitz in 1912 and 1921). Here the kernel of the Mahābhārata has been extracted to form — in German verse — the heroic poem *Die Kuruinge*, whereas several of the inserted narratives appear apart. Holtzmann's work can only be regarded as a very free recast, but with ingenious insight and deep poetic feeling he often hit upon the right (so Winternitz), as when in the narrative we here deal with he looked through the text of the vulgate to the original version, where Sāntā, the king's daughter, approaches the young hermit — which Holtzmann makes her do in the most delicate way, a bashful kiss ending the interview.

How did the opera get the name *Vifandaka*? In *Indische Sagen* the narrative is a fine, coherent poem, which does not

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10. The latter was adapted for the stage by Ferdinand Graf Sporck, with music by Hermann Zumpe, and produced in German theatres (so Winternitz). For his chamber opera *Savitri*, the English composer Gustav Holst (1874-1934), who knew Sanskrit, wrote his own libretto.

contain the story of the doe as the boy's mother; it is simply stated that he was his father's only son, and that he had seen no other human being than his father; accordingly there is no reason to explain his name. Holtzmann rendered Sanskrit *bh* by *f*, so that the father's name became Wifandaka. In the opera the father's name is Riasring, an adaptation of Holtzmann's Rischja-sring(a), and the young hermit is called Vifandaka. The exchange may be explained as a mistake; the Sanskrit names were not connected with any meaning and thus made it possible; but perhaps the exchange was made deliberately — Vifandaka was felt to be a better name for the youth and the opera, while Riasring was suitable for the stern, austere brahman. In the opera, Vifandaka (as we must now call him) is said to be of royal blood; his birth caused his mother's death, Riasring found him and brought him up to become a brahman.

The first act takes place in the forest near Riasring's hermitage. Riasring and Vifandaka greet the rising sun, but we soon learn that Vifandaka has no peace in mind; his heart is filled with longing, with desire; he feels a captive behind green walls — shall he never see the world outside? Riasring assures him that the world outside the silence of the forest is illusion, is sorrow and deceit; the only noble pursuit is to reach Nirvana through austerity and meditation; Riasring himself has reached so far in his striving that even Yama, Death, must obey him; he reminds Vifandaka of the solemn oath he has sworn to sacrifice his life for his foster-son. With a sigh, Vifandaka acquiesces, and they go to their work — leaving the stage to the king of Anga and his retinue. We now get the story of the drought, and the sage Katsja repeats what a voice in the temple told him — without guile or magic Vifandaka must be taken to Anga, guided by his love of a woman, and the rain will fall again; a maiden must risk Riasring's vengeance — who is willing? Silence in the chorus of maidens. Hesitating, Princess Santa approaches her father; she is willing to venture her life to save the country, strengthening herself by prayer — she is not going to do the youth any harm; only she is uncertain what she can permit herself to make him fall in love — glances, smiles, a kiss? The king and the sage reassure her and encourage her — and she is left alone.

When Vifandaka approaches, lending words to his yearning, she withdraws, and unseen by him she sings her song to the white lotus. Now follows what is perhaps the most delightful scene of the opera — the dialogue between the girl and the hermit. Though the delicate words of the two young persons are as far removed as can be imagined from the rather coarse humour of the ancient ballad, some of the characteristic details have survived. When Santa, after their bashful kisses, is taking her leave, he declares her his passionate love. He is ready to follow her, when Riasring's voice is heard in a solemn prayer for his foster-son. Vifandaka hesitates. In his heart speaks the voice of duty and attachment to his father; but at a distance Santa's song is heard, and he follows.

The second act takes place in Anga, now delivered from the drought by Vifandaka. We are, to begin with, in a sacrificial court, where the people is gathered to celebrate the blessing of the country. The king arrives with his retinue and announces that Santa will be married to Vifandaka the next day. High and low depart to praise Brama in his temple; but unnoticed in the multitude, Riasring has been present, and he now remains alone.

Up to this point the action of our opera has, in the main, based itself on the legend; but the continuation diverges from it. In the legend the father desisted from his curse, reconciled to events by the honour and the riches bestowed on his son. This ending must have impressed more than one reader as disappointing — and it would have been completely incompatible with the extreme unworldliness — or let us say fanaticism — by which Riasring is characterized. Drawing freely on the story of Sāvitrī, who rescued her husband from Yama's fetters, Tofft and Christiansen have given the opera a highly dramatic continuation.

Riasring is intent upon removing from Vifandaka's soul the stains with which Kama, Desire, has soiled it. He invokes Yama and demands from him Santa's death. Yama appears, wrapped in a cloak to veil his identity, and keeps Riasring back. Pretending to be Yama's friend he argues with Riasring, speaks of the mild forces in life, also endowed with truth and justice, warns him that Indra has blessed the union of Vifandaka and Santa.

Riasring is relentless — once more he calls upon Yama, Santa must die when the stars of night appear; and he leaves.

Yama must give way. He calls forth a thunderstorm, during which the scene is changed. We are on the banks of the Ganges. On the stairs of a temple Yama stands, now in his divine glory; he greets the sinking sun, entreating it to linger in its course; but he must pronounce the order of Santa's death, a sudden, peaceful death. When he has retired, Vifandaka and Santa are seen, arriving in a boat, from which they descend to approach the temple, in the shadow of which Santa is going to spend the last night before her marriage. After their passionate love-duet Vifandaka must leave her alone, and Yama again appears on the stairs of the temple, in front of which Santa has now lain down. He stretches his commanding arm over her — she feels dizzy — everything goes black to her eyes — she dies.

The scenery of the third act is the open space in front of Brama's temple (not the temple of the second act). Enter first Riasring — whose ear perceives the tones of the nuptial hymn sung in the temple, but who knows that his order has been obeyed, then Vifandaka, who kneels down in prayer, believing to be alone. When he approaches the temple, he is stopped by Riasring, who tells him to return with him to the hermitage — he is not requested, he will be forced to go back to be cured and obtain true happiness. Vifandaka pleads his cause and implores his powerful foster-father to be merciful. When Riasring tells him that sorrow, not joy awaits him where he is, Vifandaka does not believe him, but Riasring knows. The tones of the funeral march become audible, and slowly the procession draws near. Vifandaka throws himself over Santa's bier, and when Riasring offers his comfort for all the pain on earth, he is rejected vehemently and called Santa's murderer (the charge being repeated by the king and the choir); his so-called fatherly love is worth nothing, he is cursed by all lovers — death, cold, loss, horror belong to him. Vifandaka bids him farewell, he will ascend the pyre with Santa. At long last it dawns upon Riasring — does Brama call through the tears of the youth? He has sworn to sacrifice his life for his son — what his life could not achieve, let his death do. He invokes Yama — god of death and justice — whose command

is «life for life». Yama appears in his divine form and obeys; one hand is stretched towards Santa, he seizes Riasring's with the other, and they walk away. Santa wakes up as from a deep, dreamless sleep; the lovers kneel in gratitude to him who gave his soul for them, and in the final choral song Brama is praised as the celestial vault, light itself, not to be measured by any thought.

So far the Danish turn-of-the-century version of an ancient Indian legend. It reads as a fascinating dramatic poem, but it is, of course, only the libretto of an opera. The preparations through a long time for its performance were crowned with success, as the reviews written after the first night state unanimously<sup>11</sup>. The criticism of the music was, on the whole, favourable. Alfred Toft made his début as an organist and a composer in 1887, when his St. Cecilia aria for contralto with organ and violin obbligato was performed in a church in Copenhagen<sup>12</sup>, but so far he had only published some collections of songs, so Vifandaka was his first work of larger proportions. For a quite young composer it was a great achievement; the music gave evidence of a warm temperament and poetic sentiment; the composer showed a remarkable ability to handle great ensembles, the instrumentation was interesting — expressive, refined and picturesque; the vocal parts were born by a melodiousness rare in dramatic music, so to speak sung into the score. The work, certainly, had its weaknesses; the style was somewhat monotonous, lacked variety to characterize the persons individually; and, attempting to produce the colourful music demanded by the subject, the composer did not reveal sufficient creativity to avoid thematics recalling too obviously the great masters of dramatic music — Wagner, Verdi, Gounod, the Danish composers Lange-Müller, Niels W. Gade. The whole performance, however, made it easy to bear with some deficiency in a youthful work devoted to the theme of the struggle between earthly and heavenly love; the principal part, Vifandaka,

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11. The Copenhagen newspapers «Berlingske Tidende», «Nationaltidende», «Politiken» for 2/1 1898. The weekly «Illustreret Tidende», 1897-98, No. 15, 9/1 1898.

12. G. LYNGE, *Danske Komponister i det 20. Aarhundredes Begyndelse*, Aarhus, 1917, pp. 520-528. Gustav Hetsch in the magazine «Nordens Musik», 1919 (No. 3), pp. 23-24.



was sung by Vilhelm Herold, a lyrical tenor of world-wide reputation, and the stage-setting was magnificent — processions, dances, beautiful decorations; as remarked by one of the reviewers, the audience left the theatre « with an impression of beauty rare in our days ». Between 1898 and 1906 the opera was performed 25 times; it was permitted to rest for some years, after which it obtained nine performances in the seasons 1917-18 and 1918-19<sup>13</sup>.

Its revival occasioned some comments giving voice to a feeling of disappointment, because such a rare thing as a successful Danish opera was not put on regularly at the Royal Theatre — an opera that had been praised for its poetic richness, its dramatic beauty and its colourful instrumentation on its performance in German opera-houses. The new production did the theatre credit in every respect<sup>14</sup>. Thanks to an intense work with the big score, the moods of the music, dramatic as well as lyrical, got their proper weight; with the young Tenna Frederiksen as an enchanting Santa and Albert Høeberg embodying religious fanaticism in his Riasring, all the singers filled their parts; decorations and costumes combined sumptuousness with exquisite taste in the choice of colours, creating an Indian wonderland on the stage. The audience rewarded the first performance in 1917 (16th September) with applause whenever there was an opportunity — and after the fall of the curtain the composer was acclaimed, which was a departure from tradition. Was it meant as a protest against the opinion represented by « a certain quarter », which attributed no value to the composition, the music lacking originality and being too honey-sweet?

Alfred Tofft issued his own piano arrangement of the score in 1898, and in 1922 it was re-issued (published by the Society for the Publication of Danish Music), this time containing the text

13. M. HALLAR, *Det kongelige Teaters repertoire 1889-1975*, København, 1977.

14. « Berlingske Tidende » 16/9 and 17/9 1917. Gustav Hetsch in the magazine « Musik », 1917, pp. 149-150. Kai Flor in the magazine « Teatret », XVII, 1917-18, p. 25. I wish to thank Anne Örbæk Jensen, the Museum for the History of Music, Copenhagen, for procuring much information for me. The necessity to write this article in the course of some summer months prevented me from verifying some details. The archives of the Royal Theatre were packed up because of removal.

in both Danish and German. The Museum for the History of Music in Copenhagen possesses a copy of the latter presented by the composer to Tenna Frederiksen (Tenna Kraft after her marriage in 1927) with thanks for her unforgettable representation of Santa. Her song to the white lotus (« Du hvide Blomst, der vugges af hellige Vande ») has been admitted into *Danmarks Melodibog*, the five-volume collection of Danish songs.